Last Voyage of the *Hornet*:
The Story that Made Mark Twain Famous

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FOR GREG,
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NEVER GIVE UP.

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CHAPTER 1

The clipper ship *Hornet* drifted across the mirroring waters of the Pacific Ocean in a blistering hot calm. Not a breath of wind stirred on deck, but upper air currents filled the skysails and royals, gently propelling the vessel along. The morning air was already sweltering. The crew, all barefoot and mostly shirtless, moved lethargically in the tropical heat. Those not on duty sought shade where they could find it or lazily dangled fishing lines in the water. All the hatches, skylights, and portholes were open to admit air, making it tolerable for those below decks. Since crossing the equator two days before, the ship had been slipping slowly north through a series of hot and windless days. But that was about to change.

The captain of the *Hornet* was Josiah Mitchell, fifty-three years old, capable and levelheaded, with an inexpressive face hidden under a bushy beard. He was a captain with thirty years of experience who had already taken the *Hornet* from New York to San Francisco three times and who had commanded her again on a fourth trip to England. He knew the *Hornet* better than anyone. She was a superb ship, and so far the voyage had been pleasantly uneventful. Even the passage around the normally tempestuous Cape Horn had been remarkably smooth. Captain Mitchell joked that their

luck had been so good that he hoped they would not have to pay for it later.

The *Hornet* carried a crew of twenty-nine men comprised of the captain, three mates, twenty-three seamen, and two boys, both under the age of eighteen. They were black and white, American and foreign, professional and working class. The captain and two mates were New Englanders, the other mate English. The cook and steward were free black men. The sailors were an assemblage of immigrants and wanderers from New York, Denmark, Germany, Portugal, Spain, France, Sweden, and Cape Verde.

The *Hornet* also carried two passengers. Samuel Ferguson and his younger brother, Henry, were the privileged sons of an aristocratic family from Stamford, Connecticut. Mitchell was glad the Fergusons had come along. Captains live lonely lives of isolation at sea. Authority demands that they avoid becoming familiar with the crew, but the pressures of responsibility are compounded by solitude. Having two educated gentlemen to dine and converse with was one more thing that had made this passage so enjoyable.

May 3, 1866, began just like every other day. The crew washed the deck, then brought coal and water to the cooks. The captain paced the quarterdeck, scanning the ocean for ripples that might indicate a breeze. The cooks were preparing breakfast, while the mate's watch, on deck since 4 a.m., was hard at work on maintenance and repair. Already they had tarred the rigging and slushed the masts. A coat of tar was applied to all the standing rigging so that the ropes would not rot, and the masts were slushed with an oily gunk to help the rigging slide up and down without chafing. A great deal of maintenance work was being done so that the *Hornet* would look her best when she arrived in San Francisco in about two weeks.

At 7 a.m. Captain Mitchell ordered Sam Hardy, the first mate, to bring up a barrel of varnish from the hold so the men could brighten up the woodwork. Sam Hardy was conscientious and well-liked by the men. As first mate he bore responsibility for the ship's maintenance. Like all good officers, Hardy never sat down while on duty. He restlessly roamed the deck, always finding more things that could be done. He instructed the ship's boys in seamanship, strung hammocks for the Fergusons, and even barbered their hair. Everything had to be perfect because a good report from the captain was essential for his promotion. If all went well, this was to be Hardy's last trip as mate. The owners had promised him command of a brig on his next voyage.

Hardy was from Chatham, Massachusetts, a village on the elbow of Cape Cod. Boys who grew up on the Cape were almost predestined for a life at sea. Hardy's father was one of the few men in town who did not make his living on the water; he ran a general store located near the lighthouse. As the oldest son, Sam started out working in the store, but he wasn't interested in being a shopkeeper. Like many young men, he had a restless urge to learn what he was capable of. When his sister married, she brought her husband into the business, and Sam was free to go at last.

Now he was twenty-nine and busy climbing the ladder of success. Hardy was a hard worker and good at details. He worked his way up to mate and married his sweetheart, Lottie Gould. Before he shipped out on the *Hornet*, Lottie had let him know that she was expecting their first child. With a baby on the way and his first command in sight, Sam Hardy felt like a lucky man.

Hardy went below with two deckhands to find the barrel of varnish stored there. Despite the tropical sun, it was dark below decks, so Hardy carried a candle in an open lantern as he climbed down through the booby hatch. The captain's

order had been to bring the barrel up and open it on deck. Mitchell knew that varnish was volatile, and the combination of a poorly ventilated ship's hold with the equatorial heat sometimes caused the spontaneous combustion of flammable cargoes, but when a captain gives an order, it is not necessary for him to explain his reasons.

The air below deck was stifling, and the barrel was heavy. No one had slept well in the heat. Hardy looked at the two sweaty sailors who would have to shoulder it up the ladder and decided to draw a small can of varnish and carry that up instead. Holding the candle in his left hand, he opened the spigot on the barrel with his right. He had nearly finished the job when his left hand strayed too near the varnish. The candle ignited the vapors with an audible flash, and then the varnish ignited too, badly burning Hardy's hands. He dropped the can, and the flames spread across the deck. In his haste to put out the fire, he left the spigot on the barrel open. Varnish continued to flow out of the spigot, creating a widening puddle of flame.

The flaming varnish first ignited some rope and canvas in the sail locker, then moved with alarming speed toward the cargo. The *Hornet* carried 20,000 gallons of kerosene and 6,700 boxes of paraffin candles, as well as some coal. She was a floating bomb, and Hardy had just lit the fuse.

One of the hands raced up the ladder to the main deck, shouting, "Fire! Fire in the hold!" while Hardy and the other deckhand frantically beat the flames with blankets. They fought bravely and scorched themselves badly, but it was no use.

Below decks, Samuel and Henry Ferguson lay in their bunks. The ship's bell signaled seven o'clock. Samuel nudged his brother.

"Wake up, Henry. Six bells."

"'Nother minute," mumbled Henry, turning his face to the wall. Suddenly they heard bare feet running on the main deck overhead, and someone shouted, "Fire!" Henry's eyes flew open, and he leaped out of his bunk. The smell of smoke encouraged them to dress quickly. Samuel grabbed a few things before leaving the cabin: a pocket journal, pencils, some brandy, and his little red *Book of Common Prayer*. He hesitated only a moment before tucking his pistol and some cartridges into the pocket of his overcoat. On deck, they found seamen scrambling everywhere and smoke rising from the booby hatch.

Covered with black soot, Hardy bounded up on deck calling for water, rivulets of sweat running down his blackened face in grimy streaks.

"Lawson! Tate!" Hardy roared. "Chop a hole in the deck! Rig the pumps, and get some water into the hold!"

The next moment Captain Mitchell rushed forward to countermand that order. He knew that water is worse than useless for putting out fuel fires. Kerosene is lighter than water, so it floats on top, continuing to burn as the water spreads the flames wherever it flows.

"Stop! No water! We need to smother that fire! Close all hatches and ports!" shouted Mitchell. But even as this was being done, the first cask of kerosene exploded, sending a geyser of flame up through the hatch, igniting a staysail fifteen feet overhead.

Fire is the greatest calamity that can happen at sea and a brave man's worst fear. Caught between fire and water, there is no escape. Sailors can sleep through a hurricane, but fire is a more immediate crisis—one that makes the knees go weak and the heart rise in the throat. Fred Clough, a sailor who was sleeping below decks, heard someone shout "Fire" and sprang from his bunk to find the ship already consumed

by flames from alow to aloft. The web of dry manila and hemp lines ignited easily, spreading the fire wherever they went. Clough's face whitened as he took in the scene.

"Clew up the sails! Pass buckets aloft!" called Captain Mitchell. The men leaped to the ratlines, but the fire leaped faster, rushing up the freshly tarred rigging and slushy masts, igniting each sail with a *whoosh*. The *Hornet* carried more than one and a half acres of canvas sails. In minutes, most of it was on fire. Under this tower of flame, the heat was unbearable. The men slipped back down the ratlines. There was nothing they could do.

Disaster unfolded with astonishing speed. Living sheets of crimson flame swirled into roaring vortexes that sucked up all the oxygen. The pitch in the decks boiled, burning the men's bare feet. Bits of burning canvas rained down from the rigging. Only thirty minutes after the fumes caught fire, the captain gave the order to abandon ship.

Captain Mitchell gave all the necessary orders without using one word too many: "Port watch, lower the boats. Starboard watch, go below and bring up all the supplies you can."

"It's hot as hellfire below, Captain," complained one crewman. "We can't go in."

"Go in anyway, and salvage anything you can. Your lives depend upon it."

No one wants to be the first to panic. The steady example of the captain encouraged each man to be his equal. Mitchell himself dove into his cabin to retrieve his quadrant, his nautical almanac, and his copy of Nathaniel Bowditch's *New American Practical Navigator.* These were critical for navigation. Each man had only a moment to grab whatever was handy. The cook grabbed some food, the carpenter his

tools, the seaman his ditty bag. Other crewmen saved a studding sail and some canvas but not much else.

The *Hornet* was equipped with three small boats. There was the longboat—twenty-one feet long, six feet wide, used to carry the captain to and from the ship—and two quarter boats, which were smaller and designed mostly for the crew to row ashore to get fresh water or supplies. None of them was intended for a prolonged ocean voyage. Each of the boats had a sail, but at the moment those were burning up in the sail locker.

The quarter boats launched first. The men worked in haste, as they were literally roasting. Haste leads to carelessness. In a lather of sweat and nearly suffocated by smoke, they managed to launch the first mate's boat smoothly, but when the second mate, the Englishman John Parr, launched his boat, an oar became wedged between the *Hornet* and the quarter boat. Its handle knocked a hole in the boat just above the waterline.

Mr. Parr was not an easygoing man, and he screamed, "That's nice work! That boat was to save our lives! Now we must burn or drown! You paragons of stupidity have succeeded in destroying our last remaining chance for survival! Ship those blasted oars, if it's not too much to ask, and find something to plug that hole!" He continued shouting orders and recriminations.

On the other side of the ship, crewmen were preparing to lower the longboat. Shifting from one foot to the other on the smoldering deck, the distracted men made the mistake of loading their supplies into the boat before they launched it. When they tried to hoist the longboat to the davits, it was too heavy and crashed back onto the deck. A protruding eyebolt punched a hole the size of a man's head in the bottom on the starboard side of the keel. Seeing this, some of the

men rushed across the deck to where the quarter boats were loading. Mr. Hardy barred their way, his feet planted on the deck. "Go back. You can't all get in this one," he said.

"The longboat's been stove. She won't float now," complained one sailor.

John Thomas, the third mate, joined Hardy, a belaying pin in his hand. "Get back! We can patch it," he said.

"There's a hole in her big enough to pass a pumpkin!" said a second sailor. "We'll drown in that thing."

"I'm telling you to go back before we all burn up!" said Mr. Thomas raising the belaying pin. "Unpack her until she is light enough to raise off the deck. Do it now, or I'll wipe the deck with you!" He spun the nearest man around by his shoulder and gave him a shove. The others followed.

They hastily unpacked some items, then successfully launched the boat. Mr. Thomas stuffed blankets and canvas in the hole. This kept the boat from sinking, but it was leaking badly and would require almost constant bailing.

Three sick men who had been resting below hauled themselves up on deck, their clothing singed. One of them, Antonio Possene of Cape Verde, crawled to the small pile of supplies and began cramming bread into his mouth.

Mr. Thomas saw him and swore, "What the hell are you doing? Give me that, you poxy bastard!" He tore the bread from Possene's grasp, then turned to his watch and said, "Get this sneak thief out of my sight." After lowering the water cask into the boat on a sling, they lowered Possene the same way.

The crew climbed down the side of the *Hornet* into the waiting boats. Last came Harry Morris, a Frenchman of Le Havre, running with a struggling rooster pinned under one arm. The rooster, named Richard the Lion Heart, was the

ship's mascot. Morris tossed Richard into the longboat and then dove from the blazing ship into the sea. Superstition has it that unless the mascot is saved, the crew will not survive either, and sailors are extremely superstitious. When the men saw Morris with the cockerel, they cheered enthusiastically. His comical dive coaxed the unexpected sound of laughter from men fleeing for their lives.

Morris climbed aboard dripping wet and took his place in the bow. Captain Mitchell took command of the longboat with the two passengers and ten crewmen. Mates Hardy and Parr took charge of the two quarter boats. Hardy took eight men, Parr seven. Mr. Thomas went in the longboat to assist his captain. All were badly scorched, and Mr. Hardy had serious burns on his hands. They cast off, and the captain ordered them to pull away to windward quickly. Flaming debris rained down on them, threatening to ignite the salvaged canvas in the longboat. If that happened, it was all over.

The three boats came together upwind of the blazing *Hornet*. The heat was so intense that they had to stand off at a considerable distance. The men, each with a lump in his throat, watched the ship burn. The words *Hornet*, *New York* painted on her graceful elliptical stern suddenly became deeply cherished. New York meant comfort and security, while the *Hornet* was home and transportation back into the world.

Captain Mitchell had never seen a better ship. She had once beaten the famous *Flying Cloud* in a race, and she held the speed record for San Francisco to Callao. Watching her burn was like watching a friend die. Smoke rose like a distress call from the stricken ship, but he was powerless to assist.

It was 8 a.m. A quick check showed that all hands were accounted for. Together they watched as the main mast cracked and fell back against the mizzen mast; then they both fell sideways into the sea, leaving only the foremast standing.

The men's position was serious. All the boats were dangerously overloaded and riding so low that water lapped at the gunwales. Two of the three boats had holes in them. None had sails. Their forty-gallon water cask was only one-third full. They had one hundred pounds of sea biscuit, six buckets of potatoes, seven small pieces of salt pork, four hams, half a box of raisins, four pounds of butter, and fourteen two-pound cans of oysters, clams, and beef soup. They also salvaged one hundred pounds of tobacco and some pipes. The Fergusons had saved three bottles of brandy. Only this, for thirty-one men who hadn't eaten breakfast yet and were already hungry.

A billowing black cloud of smoke rose a few hundred feet before leveling out in the torrid air. "That cloud of smoke can be seen for a hundred miles. With any luck, another ship will see it and come to pick us up," declared the captain with some confidence. Henry Ferguson hoped he was right.

The fire burned all day, the glassy sea reflecting its red-gold flames. Mitchell maintained an air of calm, collecting his thoughts and forming a plan, but inside he worried. They had only three days of provisions. If they ate a third of the normal amount, those could be stretched to feed them for ten days, and yet they were becalmed more than one thousand miles from land. They might catch some fish along the way. Hopefully it would rain so they could capture some water, but would it be enough?

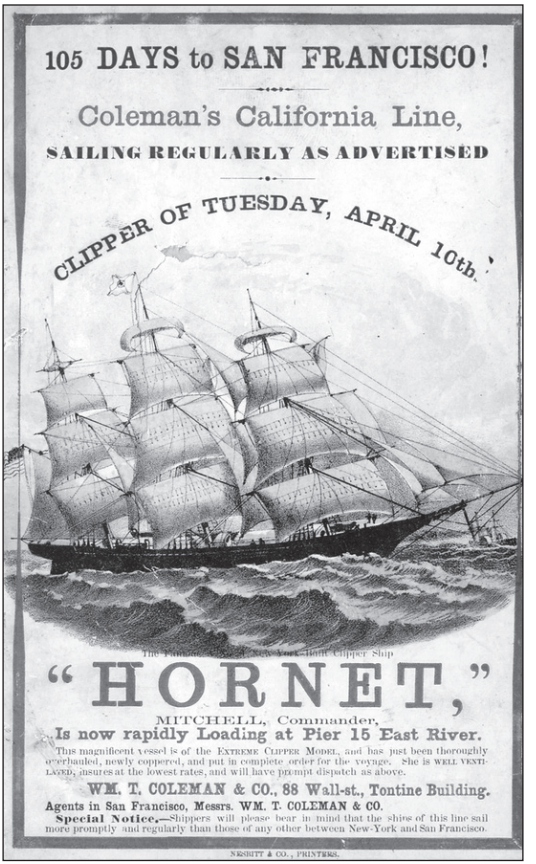
Mitchell called the quarter boats over and divided the food according to the number of men in each boat. He made

sure that each boat had a copy of Bowditch's *Navigator* and a nautical almanac. The captain and Mr. Parr had good compasses, but Mr. Hardy had only a small pocket compass given to him by Samuel Ferguson, and they had only two chronometers. Mitchell kept one and gave the other to Mr. Hardy.

Mitchell set the men to work right away. Jack Campbell, the sailmaker, had his ditty bag. Mitchell directed the men to form three square sails from the studding sail and canvas they had saved. Each boat had a hatchet. Ben Lawson, the carpenter, and his men transformed salvaged spars into three masts and made yardarms from the floating wooden debris. Each man was alone with his thoughts, stunned and trying to process the enormity of what had happened in the last hour. They worked quietly all day beneath the glaring sky fashioning masts and sails. They said little, and no one ate that day. At sundown Captain Mitchell broke the silence when he called them together. They all went down on their knees as he led them in prayer.

All night the sailors bent over their work, faces glowing in the fierce light of the burning ship. Just before dawn, every head turned as a crash came from the *Hornet*. The red-hot anchor had broken through the cathead and plunged into the sea with a hiss. Steam rose up in a cloud as two hundred fathoms of glowing chain whizzed through the hawsehole after it. When the chain ran out, it jerked the windlass, which skidded across the charred deck, smashed through the rail, and followed the anchor to the bottom of the sea. It was a spectacular sight, with the red-hot anchor and the orange ribbon of chain glowing in the darkness, the sound of splintering wood, and the hiss of superheated metal hitting the water. Henry Ferguson thought he might have enjoyed it under better circumstances.

At 5 a.m. the fire finally burned through the hull. The *Hornet's* stern rose as she went down bow first. She kept right on burning until she slipped underwater. Watching her go, the men felt forlorn. "We felt as if someone or something had gone away, as if we hadn't a home anymore," recalled one sailor. Even aflame, the *Hornet* had provided light and the hope that someone would find them. But now she was gone, and they were alone on the great, wide ocean. No ship had come. They would have to save themselves, if they could.



A sailing card advertising the *Hornet*, with Mitchell as commander, on one of her earlier cruises — courtesy of the author